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“Asexual” Isn’t Who I Am’: The Politics of Asexuality

Matt Dawson, Susie Scott, Liz McDonnell

Abstract: Some literature on asexuality has claimed that it is inherently radical and contains the potential for resistance. Unfortunately this literature has tended to be unempirical, has imagined asexuality as a disembodied entity and marginalised the multiple identities held by asexual people. This paper, inspired by Plummer’s critical humanist approach, seeks to explore how individuals understand their asexuality to encourage forms of political action in the areas of: identity, activism, online spaces and LGBT politics. What we found was a plurality of experiences and attitudes with most adopting a pragmatic position in response to their social situation which saw large scale political action as irrelevant. We conclude by reflecting on what these results mean for those who see asexuality as potentially radical.

Keywords: Asexuality, critical humanism, identity, LGBT, sexuality

The emergence of asexuality has led scholars to make strong political claims. These writers have suggested that asexuality has the potential to: redefine the nature of intimate relationships; overcome the dominance of ‘sexusociety’; resist neoliberal conceptions of citizenship; and aid anarchist politics. Unfortunately, the strength of these claims has run inverse to the evidence used to substantiate them. Instead they have largely concerned what asexuality *ought to be* and, ipso facto, how asexual people *ought to behave* rather than exploring the beliefs and actions of asexual people. This has been part of a wider trend where ‘asexuality’ comes to be treated as a disembodied entity which ‘challenges’ contemporary society. Unfortunately, this overlooks how asexuality exists as a sexual orientation held by a diverse set of people, resulting in differing forms of action.

To counter this trend, this paper outlines the political views held by asexual people. We will discuss: the salience of asexual identity; our participants' activism; and their interaction with LGBTQ groups/politics¹. In doing so, we are in agreement with two arguments concerning the nature of sociological research. Firstly, we share Plummer's advocacy of a 'critical humanist' perspective which, with its use of 'documents of life' seeks to pay special attention to the 'concrete human experiences' of social life in which individuals 'respond to social constraints and actively assemble social worlds' (Plummer 2001:14). This does not, as indicated, involve marginalising forms of oppression and injustice, but rather, in understanding how these are experienced and interpreted, abides by 'the humanistic commitment of the qualitative researcher to study the world always from the perspective of the interacting individual' (Lincoln and Denzin 1994:575). It is this commitment which often has been lacking in the literature to date. Secondly, we echo Duncan's (2011) claim that when discussing processes of social change, in his case individualization, sociologists have tended to place individuals either into a 'vanguard' or 'traditionalist' camps. Instead, as Duncan demonstrates, these groups may only cover a small minority, with the majority of actors adopting a more 'pragmatic' approach of partial acceptance and disagreement towards emerging social formations, based upon their value and significance to them. Therefore, following these principles, we seek to understand how asexual people experience and interpret their own identities, any resulting oppression they experience, and how this does or does not inspire them to engage in political action. As we shall see, while some of our participants were active politically, others saw no need for asexual activism and were dismissive of the notion. We will conclude by suggesting that rather than ascribing a political position to asexuality, we should be aware of the diversity of asexual people's experiences. This emerges when we 'listen attentively to the stories people tell of their lives' (Plummer 2001:255).

The Politics of Asexuality

Asexuality can be defined as, to use the definition from the Asexuality, Visibility and Education Network (AVEN) as ‘a person who does not experience sexual attraction’ (AVEN 2017). However, forms of asexual identity take more complex forms which operate across two axes. The first concerns sexual desire, running from a complete absence of/aversion to sexual desire (‘asexual’, ‘sex-repulsed’) through people who may feel sexual desire once a relationship has developed (‘demisexual’) and up to those in the ‘grey area’ between asexuality and forms of sexual desire (‘grey-a’). This axis intersects with another concerning romantic attraction, which covers not only the amount of romantic attraction (‘aromantic’ or ‘romantic’) but also the object of such attraction (‘homoromantic’, ‘biromantic’, ‘heteroromantic’ etc.). The complex forms of identities which can be produced across these intersections (such as, in our sample, heteroromantic grey-asexual, panromantic demisexual and repulsed heteroromantic asexual) are significant not only for understanding the complexity of asexual identity (see Dawson, Scott, McDonnell 2017a) but also, as we shall see below, for the differing approaches to asexual activism they produced.

What can be termed the ‘political literature’ on asexuality seeks to place these complex asexual positions within a wider conception of ‘sexusociety’ (Pryzbolo 2011) as a response to the first studies on asexuality from the human sciences (e.g. Bogaert 2004, Prause and Graham 2007, Brotto et al. 2010, Yule et al. 2014). This earlier body of literature attracted notable criticism, frequently on the grounds of methodology (Hinderliter 2009, Carrigan et al. 2013). However, the political literature offered a more fundamental critique.

Pryzbolo (2012) argues that the knowledge of asexuality has been shaped by scientific definitions. This began with Kinsey’s attempt to challenge what he saw as a problematically

high level of ‘X-ness’ (asexuality) among women and continues as an effort to identify the ‘truth of the body’ (Pryzbolo 2012:234). By suggesting asexuality can be identified and predicted solely by biological and physiological characteristics science acts as a form of ‘sexual colonization which purports to identify and label whole sexual realities for groups of certain people’ (Pryzbolo 2012:230). As a result, Pryzbolo cautions against seeing scientific research as liberatory. Instead, it could limit the potential claims concerning asexuality by marginalising the ideas of those who identify with it (Pryzbolo 2012:239).

Chasin (2013) develops this political critique by identifying an innate ‘academic conservatism’. There are three key claims to her argument. Firstly, the attempt to establish asexuality as a ‘legitimate’ sexual orientation has relied upon an image of the ‘real’ asexual who ‘has all the characteristics of the ideal sexual person but is simply unable to be sexual and, therefore, should be accepted as asexual’ (Chasin 2013:418). This has been referred to elsewhere as the construction of the ‘gold star’ asexual who is likely to be an attractive, white, able bodied, middle class person (Cuthbert 2017). Secondly, by defining the ‘real’ asexual this also imagines ‘people who are “legitimate” subjects of psychiatric intervention for low sexual desire’ (Chasin 2013:406). Finally, this binary between ‘real’ asexuals and those who legitimately need treatment means the primacy of the sexual is maintained. This, for Chasin, is the inevitable result of an academic approach that seeks to classify and categorise individuals, rather than change the social environment in which they live, consequently negating the radical potential of asexuality which rests in the idea that:

If it can be okay for asexual people to not want sex, maybe we can make it okay for anyone to not want sex. This would be a world where being sexual is no longer mandated as a prerequisite of normalcy or intimacy and where nonsexual relationships are recognized and valued. It would be a world without sanctions against not wanting sex – where sex is no longer an obligation or a commodity that is owed. This would be a world where no level of

sexual desire is pathological and where the social emphasis is on sexuality being self-affirming in whatever unique form it takes (Chasin 2013:416)

It is this point, that asexuality is potentially radically transformative, which comes to define the political literature. For example, Milks and Cerankowski (2014:13-14) argue asexuality has the potential to question a ‘mainstream culture, with its “make it sexy” imperative and “hot or not” hierarchy’ and to ‘radically rethink sexuality, queerness, desire, and intimacy in terms of *not* desiring sex, *not* having sex, or *not* experiencing sexual attraction’. Similar radical claims for asexuality include: the problematizing of ‘sex’ as an essential act (Pryzbolo 2011, Flore 2014); questioning a form of neoliberal ‘liberal humanism’ in which a productive (in all sense of the term) individual is valued (Gressgård 2013, Pryzbolo 2013); the ‘desexualisation’ of identity in favour of notions of difference (Gupta 2017) and suggesting a ‘healthy’ lifestyle which doesn’t require sex (Kim 2010). A particularly confident version of this argument comes from Fahs (2010) who, in equating asexuality with a choice made by women, frames asexual people as ‘radical refusals’. By refusing to engage in sex asexual people reclaim agency over their body and echo an anti-family politics found in radical feminist perspectives. This is fundamentally anarchist; a form of positive freedom challenging those seeking to control female bodies. Consequently, asexuality is either queer or pathological (Sinwell 2014, Kurowicka 2015), with the former challenging a ‘conservative’ LGBT politics which proclaims same-sex marriage as a key goal (Scherrer 2010, Chu 2014).

While the political literature provided a useful critique of the human scientific approach to asexuality, it is open to two criticisms. Firstly, whether asexuality is a potentially radical political formation is an empirical claim, which is not justified solely by rejecting a conservative human scientific approach. However, with the exception of Scherrer (2010) and Gupta (2017, see below), none of this literature has used empirical data. This is important for

the second criticism: in making these arguments, asexuality is reified as a disembodied entity with its own agency:

Asexuality, in choosing to repeat differently, must also choose to abandon its reactive, binary-bound sense of itself, focusing on what it does instead of what it does not do. It must shift from declarations of absence, to an enacting of difference, both linguistically and actually. For resistance to be genuine, asexuality should repeat itself differently, plurally, and complexly. This is where its resistant energies lie: in alternative and plural enactments. This is what asexuality must do as a strategy of being, for absence can only be exciting and meaningful for short bursts of time (Pryzbolo 2011: 456-457)

Here, ‘asexuality’ exists, but not asexual people. Similar claims are found in Flore’s (2014:29) abstract assertion that we should consider asexuality a form of resistance since that would be ‘more interesting and politically viable’ and Fahs’ (2010:456) unsubstantiated claim that ‘social desirability and economics drive asexuals into relationships despite lack of sexual attraction or arousal’. The problem here is that ‘asexuality’ doesn’t act politically; asexual people may or may not mobilise politically. Whether this happens is an empirical question.

This creation of a political entity named ‘asexuality’ means that, ironically given its emergence as a response to ascriptive claims from the human sciences, the political literature tends to proclaim there is a ‘correct’ political position:

These kinds of politicizations present a prescriptive asexual politics with teleological investments, one that repeats mainstream prescriptions for asexual identities: ‘you’re just not fully mature yet’; ‘you’re a late bloomer’; ‘you just haven’t found the right person’. Paralleling this narrative of personal maturity, then, is a narrative of political maturity: as though, when asexual politics discovers how to be ‘genuinely transformative’, then it will be suitably liberated, transgressive – whole (Milks 2014:113)

This then leads to the second critique: these political claims tend to see asexuality as ‘a single axis of identity with little consideration of social relations of gender, “race”, class and disability’ (Cuthbert 2017:241-242). Indeed, researchers have been critical of the tendency for such research to overlook how asexuality is racialized (Owens 2014) and marginalises those who are disabled and asexual (Kim 2011) as part of an actor’s plural identities. For example, Cuthbert’s intersectional (2017) research on those who identify as both asexual and disabled indicated that, while some were politically active, others, contrary to the political literature, saw their asexuality as, at least partly, ‘caused’ by their disability. Some were concerned about attending events like Pride, for fear that asexuality would be seen as more transgressive than it is (Cuthbert 2017: 248-252).

Gupta’s (2017) paper, by drawing upon interviews and thus being a rare empirical exploration of this topic, deserves extended discussion here. Gupta (2017:1000-1009) suggests asexual people practice resistance by: emphasising a language of difference rather than deviance when it comes to asexuality; encouraging the ‘desexualisation’ of identity; seeking ‘new relationships’ on the boundary of friendship and romance; and building an asexual community. Gupta’s paper is a valuable discussion of how her participants experience marginalisation. She also recognises that not all asexual practices are inherently radical, and is well attuned to the aforementioned critique of Milks. However, there are two ways in which our paper diverges from hers. Firstly, a limitation she acknowledges (2017:996) is that her participants were all active in AVEN. This is significant, not only given that not all asexual people are active on AVEN, but also since, as we will discuss, many of our participants were critical of the political positions founded on AVEN. Secondly, Gupta’s definition of ‘resistance’ is extremely broad. For example, seeing asexuality as not a key part of one’s identity is, for Gupta, ‘radical in that it contests the idea that sexuality is a central part of what it means to be human’ (Gupta 2017:1013). However, for something to

qualify as ‘resistance’ we surely need to demonstrate whether this attitude engenders forms of social action which seek to encourage forms of social change. This is not fully demonstrated in Gupta’s analysis, which focuses largely on self-understanding; simply *being* asexual comes to be seen as resistance. But, in this example it is equally plausible, as was indeed the case for many of our participants, for this attitude to discourage political action precisely because one’s sexual identity is not seen as especially significant to their social experiences².

Therefore, we would suggest that when discussing radical politics and ‘resistance’, as the political literature seeks to, we need to be aware of two factors: firstly, how are political positions taken by individuals who then mobilise, or do not mobilise, around these political claims? Secondly, given the diversity of asexuality – not just within the asexual umbrella but the diversity of social positions occupied by asexual people – we need to be attuned not just to what unites asexual people but what divides them. In an attempt to respond to these criticisms, we will focus specifically on: the salience of identity; activism; online spaces; and the role of asexuality within LGBTQ spaces/politics. Before this, we discuss the methodology of our project.

Methodology

The findings in this paper emerged from a two-year project entitled ‘A Qualitative Exploration of Asexual Identities and Practices of Intimacy’, funded by the Leverhulme Trust (grant code RPG-2012-575). This set out to answer two questions: ‘How do individuals form an asexual identity?’ and ‘How is intimacy constructed and maintained in relationships where one, or all, of the principles identifies as asexual?’. Participants were asked to take part in two activities: a biographical in-depth narrative interview discussing how their asexual identity has developed and a two week diary which contained daily prompts concerning their experiences of being asexual. 50 participants took part in the interview, of whom 27 also

completed the diary. As the above indicates, asexual politics were not the focus of our research. Nevertheless, given the prominence of the political literature we did include a question about whether our participants had ‘been an activist in the asexual community or in relation to asexual issues’. Furthermore, participants often volunteered information about these issues, along with their political engagements more generally, when discussing how they came to identify as asexual. The majority of data discussed in this come from the interviews, not just because of their greater number but also because of how much people talked about political issues in those conversations.. We shall refer to all of the participants in this paper with pseudonyms.

We analysed our data using thematic analysis and NVivo 10. This involved coding the entire data set framed by our initial research question and then using the codes as building blocks for analytically interpretive themes. The themes discussed in this paper were part of a separate secondary analysis concerning emergent themes on politics. In line with Plummer’s (2001) critical humanist approach the purpose of this analysis section was to understand how participants understood their social situations as knowledgeable actors who ‘nest in a universe of context’ (Plummer 2001:262) while also having clear ‘moral characters’ which concern themselves with the question of ‘how to live a life’ (Plummer 2001:263). Consequently, our purpose was to understand what is and isn’t seen as political action from our participants’ perspective. We shall return to a possible critique of our approach, that actors may not be politically knowledgeable or be cognisant of appropriate political tactics, in the conclusion to our paper.

We recruited by a variety of means, including a call for participants on AVEN along with other online spaces such as Tumblr, Twitter and a note attached to a Huffington Post article.

Additionally, we sought to recruit via LGBT groups and flyers posted locally. Despite efforts to obtain a broad group of participants, our eventual sample did contain the same skew found in other qualitative research on asexuality. Namely, based upon participant information self-completion questionnaires, 76% of our sample were under 29 years old and only 10% above the age of 42, 66% were female/cisfemale, 16% male/cis male (with 6 further gender identities accounting for the remaining participants), 54% had a University qualification, 22% had completed A Levels or equivalent, 18% had completed GCSE or equivalent, 74% were white³ and 76% came from either the UK or the US (with the remainder spread across Sweden, Canada and Australia). The forms of asexual identification were, however, very diverse, with our 50 participants offering 22 different identities (4 people provided no response). ‘Aromatic Asexual’ accounted for 8 and ‘heteroromantic asexual’ 5 of our participants with the remaining 20 identities (which spanned across the romantic attraction and sexual desire axes) being held by between 1-4 participants.

As we shall see, this diversity of identities is significant to any debate on asexual politics. In our sample, the other demographic categories had less impact on our participants’ involvement in asexual politics. It was the case that younger, more well-educated, participants were more likely to have taken part in LGBT groups due to their having joined them while at University. Additionally,, the ‘newness’ of asexuality as an identity may have meant that participants aged around 30 and over had developed a separate identity prior to the emergence of political spaces (such as AVEN) devoted to asexuality. Nevertheless, aside from these two qualifying comments, it was primarily the nature of asexual identification which, for reasons we shall explore, provided divergences, when these existed, in our data. We acknowledge, however, that this could be due to the relative homogeneity of our sample (though we would suggest this could reflect the position of those likely to identify as asexual,

see Dawson, McDonnell, Scott 2017) and recognise the continued importance of the intersectional approach to asexuality advocated by Cuthbert (2017).

The Salience of Identity

We begin with how central our participants considered asexuality to be to their lives. As we have discussed elsewhere (Scott, McDonnell, Dawson 2016; Dawson, Scott, McDonnell 2017) this revealed a variety of perspectives ranging from rejection as a ‘non-issue’ (Nadine) through neutral indifference as number ten on a top ten list of one’s identities (Kris), to enthusiastic embracing as meaning ‘I’m no longer upset to be who I am’ (Tom).

What is relevant for this paper are the explanations offered by participants as to the value, or lack thereof, attached to their asexuality. In particular, to what extent did our participants see their asexuality as a key factor that marginalised them from areas of social life, or left them open to discrimination? This returns to us to the problems of living in a ‘sexusociety’ (Przybalo 2011), which inspired the political literature. We did, of course, find evidence of discrimination against asexual people. A particularly stark instance came from Bella:

I just remember just, like, situations where I was, yeah, getting asked the same basic questions ‘So what is asexuality?’, and it’s like: ‘when you don’t experience sexual attraction’ and then it was like ‘Eughhhhh’. And then certainly a lot of the sort of guys there were rugby lads, or whatever, were just like ‘No you’re not!’. And there was one, oh my God, there was one guy who was just sort of like ‘Oh, yes – you need a good cock in you’...No one challenged it

Without wishing to downplay such instances,, what was marked in our sample was that this was not the majority experience. Instead participants frequently spoke of how they had heard of instances of discrimination against *other* asexual people but they had been ‘lucky’ (as Winnie put it).

This was linked to the act of coming out, which should be central to asexual politics, since it would aid movements engaged in ‘radical refusal’ (Fahs 2010). However, coming out was not considered important for many of our participants. For instance:

Martha: I think asexuality is a sexuality in the sense that atheism is a religion...I just don’t think that asexuals face the same challenges as someone coming out as a homosexual...So it might be a ‘coming out’, but not nearly as risky.

Interviewer: And why do you think it’s not?

Martha: I think it’s just because it’s a lack...I mean, you do still encounter problems, of course you do with someone who might be interested in you, and having to tell them the truth and then have that whole situation. But I mean, as far as I know, no one’s been beat up or killed or stuck into an asexuality-to-straight camp. The asexual way I don’t think is quite the same.

Two things are significant in Martha’s story, the first is her note that problems occur ‘with someone who might be interested in you’. This reflected a wider claim that discussing asexuality was necessary as a precursor to a relationship, either to dismiss the possibility or to allow for negotiations. As Josie put it, asexuality was a ‘little voucher in my bag’ which she could use to explain her lack of interest in dating. Prior to this, participants dismissed the importance of coming out. This then picks up on Martha’s other point: since asexuality is a ‘lack’ and, unlike homosexuality, was not seen to come with the same risks, it wasn’t significant to come out. As Nate put it:

I see asexuality as something that defines who you are, but because it’s something you don’t do...there’s millions of things I don’t do. I don’t go telling people those things either...I don’t go round telling people that I don’t like dusting

Similar thoughts were expressed by Immy, who was ‘reluctant to define myself with a negative and I feel that’s exactly what asexuality does’ and suggested that asexuality is a private, rather than public, matter.

In terms of intersecting identities, our participants who were homo/bi/polyromantic were likely, given the greater cultural awareness of these orientations tied to sexualities, to identify as that first before coming to an asexual identity. Examples of this came from Nasela, who was the only person out as gay at her school, and Faith, who had used multiple identities before identifying as queer in her late-teens. For both of them, coming out as gay or queer led to much more discrimination than their asexual identity. A possible reason for this was identified by Lizzie:

I’m heterosexual or like hetero-romantic and so like, um and I realise that I am privileged in that sense that if I did start dating someone I would be dating someone of the opposite sex and so nobody would really know about, just immediately looking at us that sort of sexual orientation I guess is the word

Being heteroromantic removed a visible attribute, which necessitated coming out; Lizzie could walk down the street hand-in-hand with her boyfriend and people would assume she was straight. As Iris, currently in a relationship with a man, put it, she can ‘pass as straight’⁴.

As we have seen in this section, the centrality of asexuality to our participants’ subjectivities can be questioned. To quote Maisie: “‘asexual’ isn’t who I am. This is just what I am, not who I am as a person’. This would seem to question claims that being asexual places one in a radical political position. Furthermore, as Maisie’s quotation indicates, asexual can be seen as a description of the actions one does, or does not, take part in rather than an attribute of them as a person which creates marginalisation. In short, the ‘desexualisation’ of identity (Gupta 2017) can be a form of accommodation to the world, rather than resistance to it.

Activism

For the majority of our participants, asexuality had value in helping explain to themselves, and significant others, who they were. However, even those who had experienced forms of discrimination did not see much need to engage in forms of activism. What we see instead is a more complex relation to forms of political action, moving from complete dismissal, through awareness at an interpersonal level, to attempts at educating others.

For the first group of participants who dismissed the need for any activism, this was explained by the marginal importance of asexuality to their life. For example, when asked if she was interested in activism, Kath, currently pursuing postgraduate studies, responded:

No, I don't really care, because I think there are so many more important things in life and since sex isn't important to me, I don't think about the lack of it either. I think about what I have to read for next week, or I think about how many pages I have to draft to my supervisor for next month for my thesis, and I think about what types of courses I'm going to take later in the autumn and that's all I have time for

Whereas Kath's lack of activism was driven by a personal view of asexuality's non-salience in her life, Josie returns us to a comparison with other sexualities:

I'm not out in public marching about because it seems kind of odd I guess, because with the homosexual community they're going to get hurt, hurt by ignorant assholes and there's an actual real danger...The assumption of heterosexuality in some ways I think protects asexuals because even though people get mad at us that we turn them down, they can rationalise it in their own brains as that person is just a cold heartless standoffish bitch. They're not going to say that person is a pervasion against God and I need to hurt them physically because of it. So I think although I would like recognition I don't want to co-opt

anybody's existing fights for protection and safety...I think the same kinds of tactics used to get recognition for the homosexual community, would not work with the asexual community. Ad campaigns might, basic sexual education in Sex Ed curriculums might...But I don't think that marching in the street or being loud and proud would do much...if you see a bunch of asexuals marching down the street everyone's going to go like oh, oh right and go about their business. Its only one on one with somebody like the guy whose trying to ask you out and is getting aggressive about it because you keep turning him down, that's where the danger lies for any individual...it's always at the individual level and not the social one, based on my experience.

Here we see Josie draw a careful line between the activism required for homosexuality and for asexuality. The threat of physical violence is seen as less stark for asexual people, with, as for Martha, the main threat instead coming at an interpersonal level from aggressive men whose advances are rejected. This, of course, is not a threat particular to asexual people but instead impacts all women. What is significant here though, is that Josie sees this as particular to asexuality yet does not see it as grounds for wider activism; it is seen pragmatically as not especially helpful. For her, the problem is framed around interpersonal relations which, for her, can be solved via education rather than the 'existing fights' which are required for the 'social' forms of inequality experienced by homosexual people. Therefore, we can see how what Josie terms the 'assumption of heterosexuality' may in fact mean some asexual people feel less need to confront forms of inequality which they may not directly experience.

It was this desire for education that inspired many people to engage in some form of public activity. For example, three of our participants had agreed to media appearances. Carla, who was interviewed for a local gay magazine, argued it was important to have asexuality 'pop up here and there' to encourage visibility. In addition to this we found instances of people doing

activities such as: helping arrange events for asexual awareness week, having a visible asexuality tattoo, wearing the black ring⁵, sharing links to articles about asexuality, writing a blog post, and trying to arrange meetings with asexual people new to their area.

However, even among this active group, there was no suggestion that their activity linked to a wider question of social change, as suggested in the political literature, rather the main goal was simply to increase awareness of asexuality. This was seen as especially important for young people who hopefully would not face the uncertainty our participants did growing up a time with a low level of asexual awareness. This is, of course, an admirable goal. It does not, however, suggest any of the claims of the political literature concerning a desire to challenge a particular social system. To use the language of Richardson (1990:127-9), a significant majority of our participants drew upon a ‘cultural’ narrative that placed themselves within the normative order of society, but not a ‘collective’ narrative which, by developing a ‘consciousness of kind’ provided the possibility for social transformation. Indeed, Lisa spoke specifically of her willingness to ‘let the status quo persist’, since she had no need to introduce someone to a gay partner. By making inflated claims of the political potential of asexuality then, as Milks (2014) suggests, these acts of kindness towards others and attempts at increasing knowledge are devalued. They are positioned as just *indicators* of a true, radical, asexual politics, rather than of value in and of themselves.

Online Activity: AVEN and Other Spaces

AVEN, an organisation made up of asexual people dedicated to increasing awareness, is significant to this paper for two reasons. Firstly, AVEN was central to the early awareness of asexuality, through its website and associated forum, both of which appeared in the early 2000s, serving as the first place for people to discover asexuality. Furthermore, AVEN’s

representatives, such as David Jay, have been key political actors to date, notably by appearing on TV (Kim 2010). This can be praised (Hinderliter 2009) or seen as a manifestation of the problematic mainstreaming of the gold star asexual (Owens 2014). Secondly, AVEN is the most prominent space in which asexual people meet and, potentially, organise politically.

We found a mix of attitudes towards, and uses of, AVEN. These partly depended on the stage of identification. Positive views towards AVEN usually concerned the very early stages of coming to an asexual identity, as for Martha:

When I first found AVEN it was still relatively new but there was still a pretty significant community from all across the world and I did one of these standard introductory posts and described my situation...just, you know, my name, I'm this old, I'm thinking that I'm asexual, I'm pretty sure I'm asexual...these are the things I'm having a problem with and it would be really nice to know I'm not alone. I'm glad I found you guys. And then just, hands, hands to grab.

For others, it was not necessarily the presence of such a support group that was useful about AVEN but instead the very fact of its existence. Eloise described reading the FAQ section on the site as akin to 'a choir of angels singing' and Catherine spoke of how it 'made me realise that I was acceptable'.

However, for many people their initial visit to AVEN was brief. Rather than engaging in forum discussions or reading the FAQs many participants suggested it was simply the front page of the site, with its definition of asexuality, which was important. Once that language had been supplied the site had fulfilled its use. Indeed, many spoke of themselves as 'lurkers' on AVEN, occasionally looking at the forum but never contributing to it. As Sophie put it: 'it was nice to know there is a community if I needed them but...I never really did'.

When discussing online sources AVEN was not the first choice for many of our participants. For example, Kath visited AVEN but since its users ‘have sub-categories of everything’ and ‘there’s lots of information and people have all sorts of peculiar labels for themselves’ she was more confused about her identity having visited. The same was true for Ella, whose initial visit left her ‘scratching my head and going “Huh?”’. Given this, many participants expressed an admiration for another site: Tumblr, whose value was seen to reside in its ability for personalisation. Rather than disembodied description of what aromantic, demisexual, grey-a etc. meant people could read first-hand accounts of how people thought of themselves, and share resources more effectively through re-blogging posts and the use of videos.

There was also a group who chose Tumblr over AVEN for strategic reasons, as was the case for Liam:

I’ve had a Tumblr for a few years and found those asexual people and I kind of like them better because the one’s on AVEN are a little crazy sometimes...I think I’ve seen one like asexuals are superior genetically. So sometimes the Tumblr ones are better. The Tumblr ones are just like yeah, go us!...The AVEN ones are very, very elitist.

This brings us to a wider point about the kind of political subjectivities being represented on AVEN. Liam’s claim that he found AVEN users elitist, or Nate’s claim that it was ‘stuffy’ and ‘cliquey’, were not solitary views. For example, both Simon and Bella criticised the unwillingness to consider medical explanations for asexuality which, for Bella, meant AVEN was an ableist space in which some users were dismissed as ‘just autistic’ and therefore not ‘truly’ asexual. Faith ascribed this to the dominance of ‘middle class white heterosexual’ users who, given AVEN’s policy of not seeking to ‘call out’ users couldn’t be challenged on their views. This was linked to what Sophie saw as the desire for AVEN users to be the guardians of ‘genuine’ asexuality by determining who gets to ‘count’ as asexual; as Nate put, it, there was an attempt to create ‘a little secret society’⁶.

While some participants recognised the value of having AVEN as a space in which people could meet, support each, arrange meet-ups and potentially organise politically, others were dismissive of the need for this and/or the particular format of AVEN. This included its perceived attempt to impose one ‘true’ definition of asexuality and its resulting ‘ableist’ or ‘elitist’ nature which was seen to exclude some. This again indicates the need to be aware of the diversity of asexuality and the danger of ascribing a political position to this orientation. As Nasela said, she would,

have to have more in common with the people. Rather than just being asexual. Because for me that’s not really common ground. Because that’s like to me being friends with everyone who has blue eyes. Just because their eyes are blue like it doesn’t tell you anything about a person or what they’re going to be like. I think people tend to forget that when they sort of congregate in huge groups of just common identity.

This brings us to the final element of the political literature: the role of asexuality in LGBT groups and politics.

LGBT Groups/Politics

The relations between our participants and LGBT groups were complex and multifaceted. Nasela, for example, became aware of asexuality through her membership of an LGBT group; prior to this she had identified as a lesbian. She discussed the process of coming to an asexual identity within the group:

I think it was just admitting it to myself. I thought that I couldn’t be just a little bit asexual. I thought oh I need to be asexual. And I need to be an asexual activist. And I need to fight for my right to be in LGBTQ. But then I thought to myself do I want to be in LGBTQ? Do I want to be included? And then I thought I’m just quite happy.

Nasela was also aware of how many LGBT groups, unlike hers, had been unwelcoming of asexual people:

I remember reading a quote like ‘Asexuals really don’t need to go through that struggle. They just need to stay at home and do nothing’. And I thought that is kind of true. But at the same time you’re trying to be part of an inclusive group who have been oppressed and have been prejudged. But they are pre-judging other people.

She preferred the label ‘queer’ as it was more pragmatically useful:

I think I do value it...and I think there’s strengths and limitations...I think if someone said ‘Well how do you identify?’ and I’ve said ‘Oh, I’m a homoromantic asexual’ they’d just be like ‘What?’...I think some people can use labels in their masses and then bamboozle other people. And I just don’t want to do that. So I say ‘Queer’. And if they say ‘Well what does queer mean?’ and I’ll say ‘Right, well here’s what queer means’.

Furthermore, having gained this identity, she found the actual meetings unhelpful:

I went along to one of their coffee dates, but...I don’t like to sit around a table and talk about my identity and everyone else’s identity and stuff like that ...It’s just people shouting at one another in a room...that’s what we’d spend meetings doing – just shouting at one another. It’d be ‘What does queer mean?’ ‘Queer means this’ ‘Queer’ and I’m trying to minute all this and it’s just all nonsense!

The twists and turns of Nasela’s encounters with her LGBT group reflect many of themes common to our sample. While discussion within the political literature and elsewhere has discussed asexuality’s place, or not, with the LGBTQIA umbrella, what can be marginalised is that many asexual people will be part of these groups based upon their romantic orientations and/or identification before coming to asexuality. This could be, like Nasela, due to identification as a lesbian or, as for Karin, transgender.

In our sample, LGBT groups were open to asexuality. A notable exception was Faith, who was excluded from her high school's LGBT group since the President was not willing to accept anyone outside the LGB (sic) group. Aside from this, participants would either say, much as with discrimination, that they knew of others being excluded, but they had been 'lucky' or, that while groups generally were welcoming, individuals within them may be less so. An example of this came from Bella who, during a debate at her LGBT group on whether they should change their name to LGBTQ+ one member argued that 'asexuals can get their own club'. However, even here, the name change went ahead and asexual people were explicitly welcomed.

More generally, it is possible to identify three relationships between our participants and LGBT groups/politics. For a large group, following comments offered in previous sections, they saw little need to associate or act with asexual people/other members under the umbrella. Another group, primarily heteroromantic, expressed sympathy with such groups but argued that their romantic orientation meant they did not feel it was appropriate to join them. Finally, a third group were active in the groups.

However, a significant question confronted our participants once they were in these groups: were their concerns and political interests the same as other members? This returns us to the intersection of romantic and sexual identities. Those participants who identified as homo/bi/pan romantic tended to view their membership of LGBT groups as somewhat of an automatic. For example, Delphi, as a queer asexual, suggested that 'I don't ever have the luxury of my private life being seen as apolitical' and spent some of her time trying to 'foster an environment where somebody feels space to come out as queer'. Delphi was also eager for asexual people becoming a visible presence at Pride. Meanwhile Karin, who identified as transgender, was involved in local protests against cuts in social support and had used a

controversy concerning misogyny on her campus as the chance to pen a University article advocating respect for all, including asexual people.

However, for participants of other romantic identities this was less clear. The aforementioned comments concerning the ability of heteroromantic asexuals to ‘pass’ (Goffman 1963) meant most felt little need to seek out membership of an LGBT society. A good example came from Simone, who openly wondered about her place in such a group:

There’s a big debate over whether asexuality is inherently queer...Asexuals who have heteronormative relationships – like, are they really asexual or are they really queer or something? And the fact that I do have a heterosexual relationship, it’s kind of put me on the outside of that...that doesn’t really affect how I feel about myself but that kind of affects how I participate in discussions about asexuality. ‘Cause I’m always coming from the point of someone in a heteronormative relationship that looks completely normal...I’m never going to be persecuted for having this relationship. So all of my asexual experiences are on the inside; like the way I react to things and not the way people react to me.

The three groups and their differing relationship to LGBT groups questions the idea that asexual people would be invested with a queer political perspective (Chasin 2013, Kurowicka 2015). Some did indeed hold queer political positions, but this was not due solely to an asexual position, but rather reflected the diversity of identities within asexuality. It also, once more, reminds us of the need to recognise that the extent of political activism is an empirical question to be answered, and in which the intersecting identities of individuals plays a role, rather than something to be assumed based upon one element of their identity.

Conclusion

As we have seen, the political views and engagements from asexual people differed greatly and, contrary to claims from the political literature, had no suggestion of any intrinsic link between asexuality and radical politics. Given the diversity within asexuality this should not be especially surprising. Indeed, for many of our participants, asexuality had little impact on their day-to-day lives, particularly in terms of generating the forms of discrimination and exclusion which would spur individuals towards political action. Furthermore, heteroromantic asexual people claimed they could ‘pass’ quite effectively at an everyday level and, for others, the fact asexuality defined a ‘lack’ of something made activism unnecessary. Of course, this was not a universal case and we have shown instances of people for whom asexuality was a central part of their identity, which led them to activism and were involved in LGBT politics. In this sense, the political literature has partly captured the experience of one group of asexual people but has, problematically, universalised and radicalised it. In doing so, such scholars have overlooked to need to recognise the ‘interactive self, striving for meaning...in specific social worlds’ (Plummer 2001:255)

There are two possible responses to our argument. The first one is to argue that it is not the political activities of asexual people which are important, but rather their very existence and practices. By *being asexual* people have the potential to question sexusociety and its forms. There are two problems with this claim. Firstly, it tends to see actors as individualised in their actions – they simply act as ‘an asexual’ – rather than embedded in social relationships which shape their actions (as in intimate relationships). By treating ‘asexuality’ as a disembodied identity to which we can ascribe intent we marginalise the more important question of how *asexual people* act in society. This is where starting from the critical humanist position of Plummer (2001), and beginning our discussion with the ways in which people negotiate and interact in varied social worlds, is a valuable corrective. Secondly, it is somewhat of a circular argument; it proclaims both that asexual people are limited in acting as they wish due

to sexusociety but that by engaging in asexual practices asexual people challenge sexusociety. In this sense, almost every form of existence around asexuality can be considered ‘resistance’. In so doing the pragmatic adjustments of individuals to their social situation are overlooked in an attempt to identify a ‘vanguard’ (Duncan 2011)⁷. Whatever their own perspectives and actions, individuals are made into radicals.

The second response leads on from this. It could be said that whatever the views and experiences of our participants, once we take a step back and consider the matter we can recognise that a radical politics which hopes to transcend sexusociety is the best, and perhaps only, way in which asexuality can achieve social acceptance. In this view, asexual people who do not currently hold this political position need to be persuaded of its value. To return to the work of Richardson (1990), the ‘cultural’ narratives of participants need to become ‘collective’, and thereby transformative, ones. This may, or may not, be true and is beyond the scope of this article. However, it does highlight the need for sociologists to separate out two separate arguments. Namely, it is one thing to argue for particular political position one values and sees as important, but it is an entirely different thing to argue these are the views groups *should/do* hold. The latter requires the varied voices, and social positions, of this group to be heard.

Notes

1. We have elsewhere (Scott, McDonnell, Dawson 2016; Dawson, Scott, McDonnell 2017) discussed some of these issues in more depth in relation to the plurality and complexity of asexual identities and practices. Therefore, we will not repeat those arguments in total here but rather discuss how these issues reflect on the possible political outcomes associated with asexuality.

2. As highlighted, Gupta shares an argument found more generally in the political literature concerning the transformation of intimate relationships. We have discussed this argument, and its limitations, in Dawson, McDonnell, Scott (2016).
3. Ethnicity was a self-completion category for our project. This number is the sum of those who provided some category of 'whiteness' (e.g. white, white British, white European etc.) and 'Caucasian'. 8 participants chose to provide their nationality here or did not wish to provide an answer. None of our participants provided a category of 'blackness'. As a result of all this it is difficult to declare definitively what ethnic groups were, or were not, included in our data beyond the recognition it was a significantly 'white' group
4. We should also recognise the forms of discrimination people experience may not be related to their sexual orientation as just one aspect of their identity. This can occur on the basis on disability (Bella) or age (Ella).
5. This is a ring with a black stone, which identifies the wearer as asexual.
6. Some other participants, while sharing these concerns, saw them as generic problems with internet forums, rather than with AVEN specifically.
7. It is, of course, possible that being part of a revolutionary vanguard might be the 'pragmatic' choice in a situation where only radical social change is seen as possible to the individual concerned. However, this was not the case in our sample.

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